The Vision of Sir Launfal by James Russell Lowell

P
PS
2312
.A1
1907a

Class PS 2312

Book .A1

Copyright No. 1907a

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

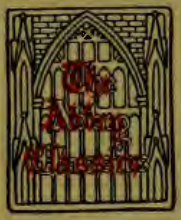
THE ABBEY CLASSICS

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

J. M. Lowell

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL BY JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
WALTER TAYLOR FIELD



PAUL ELDER AND COMPANY
SAN FRANCISCO AND NEW YORK

LIBRARY of CONGRESS
Two Copies Received
SEP 28 1907
Copyright Entry
Sep 3 1907
CLASS A XXc., No.
187811
COPY B.

PS2312
A1
1907a

COPYRIGHT, 1907, BY
WALTER TAYLOR FIELD

LOWELL AND THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

THE year eighteen hundred forty-eight marked the high tide of Lowell's literary enthusiasm. He was in the full vigor of young manhood—twenty-nine years old, and had been married four years to a wife whose sympathy inspired high ideals and stimulated him to large endeavor. But until this time he had not found himself. He had tried the law and had given it up; he had started a literary journal, The Pioneer, and it had failed; he had thrown himself into the pursuit of letters with all a young man's ardor, but had thus far done nothing to justify his choice.

In this year, eighteen hundred forty-eight, however, he wrote four poems which immediately established his fame. They were the First Series of the Biglow Papers, A Fable for Critics, The Present Crisis, and The Vision of Sir Launfal.

The last of the four is, on the whole, the most thoroughly representative, though the first shows more originality and presents a more striking phase of Lowell's genius.

The Vision of Sir Launfal was written out of a full heart and completed, practically as it now stands, in forty-eight hours. Soon after it appeared Lowell wrote to his friend Briggs:

"Last night I walked to Watertown over the snow, with the new moon before me and a sky exactly like that in Page's evening landscape. Orion was rising behind me, and as I stood on the hill just before you enter the village, the stillness of the fields around me was delicious, broken only by the tinkle of a little brook which runs too swiftly for Frost to catch it. My picture of the brook in Sir Launfal was drawn from it. But why do I send you this description—like the bones of a chicken I had picked? Simply because I was so happy, as I stood there, and felt so sure of doing something that would justify my friends."

The poem is set in two landscapes representing June and December, which symbolize two

periods of Sir Launfal's life,— the first, buoyant youth, in which he sets forth on the quest of the Grail; the second, wasted old age, in which he returns disappointed and humbled. Each of the two pictures contains also a contrasting note which has its symbolism in Sir Launfal's inward, spiritual state. The June sunshine beats in vain upon the cold wall of Sir Launfal's castle, and the springtime of youth avails not to warm into human sympathy the pride of Sir Launfal's heart. He tosses a piece of gold to the leper at the gate, but he has no thought of pity or of brotherhood.

The winter scene finds its touch of contrast in the Christmas cheer which streams out from the castle windows into the cold of the Christmas night, and in the human love which glorifies the forlorn old age of the returning wanderer as he shares his last crust with the leper and fills for him a wooden bowl with water from the brook.

We have, thus, two pictures, two stages of life, two spiritual conditions, two moral lessons— for in the first scene the leper spurns the gold without the human touch, while in the second

he receives and is strengthened by the crust and the drink of water given in love and sympathy. At this point the moral lesson merges into a religious lesson; the leper, glorified, stands before Sir Launfal in the image of the Christ, and the wooden bowl glows with supernal radiance;—it is seen to be the Grail.

The Vision of Sir Launfal illustrates three of Lowell's strongest characteristics; his kinship with nature, his wide humanity and his moral force. He was a passionate lover of the woods, the fields, the birds and the sunshine. He says in one of of his letters, "How I do love the earth! I feel it thrill under my feet. I feel as if it were conscious of my love,—as if something passed into my dancing blood from it."

His love for nature was equalled by his love for his fellow-man. Though reared amidst aristocratic influences, he always remained a democrat at heart. In his eyes it was fitting not only that Sir Launfal should break bread with the leper, but that Christ, himself, should appear in this

vagrant outcast, proclaiming the mysterious kinship between the human and the divine.

It was, however, as a moralist that Lowell made, perhaps, his deepest impress on the thought of his age. Descended from a line of ancestors who embodied the New England conscience, he placed morality above art and never hesitated when the choice lay between them. Doubtless if he had been less persistent as a preacher, he would have taken higher rank as a poet. That he realized this, is seen by his jocular reference to himself in A Fable for Critics:

> "The top of the hill he will ne'er come nigh reaching
> Till he learns the distinction t'wixt singing and preaching."

But it is, after all, somewhat better to do good than to write prettily, and the world has need of more such poets.

Two noteworthy qualities of Lowell, and only two, are absent in Sir Launfal,—humor and patriotism. Lowell's humor was genuine and rollicking, —so rollicking that Thackeray, upon reading the Biglow Papers, declared their author had a greater

genius for comedy than any English poet ever had, and regretted that he should attempt serious verse. His patriotism was deep and all-embracing. It was not merely a sentiment, it was a passion. Whether in his New England home at Cambridge, or on the anti-slavery lecture platform before the war, or as the representative of his nation at the Court of St. James, he was always an American and always proud of it.

Taken in the large, the impression of Lowell that remains with us when all specific attributes have become blurred, is that of his manliness. There was in his personality and is in his poems a virility that is one of the finest products of our free American life. And though his soul was full of visions, he seemed, Antaeus-like, to derive his strength from contact with the earth. He was not a good verse-maker. Rhyming came easily to him, but he was too often careless of form, and preferred a strong expression to a poetical one. That he has left us several almost perfect bits of poetic craftsmanship shows what he could do when he chose, but he did not always choose. He trusted

to inspiration, and it often brought him ideas clothed in the happiest phrases; often it brought only the naked thought, which he made shift to dress in such words as came first to hand.

We naturally associate Lowell with Longfellow and Holmes, those two other Cambridge poets who represent culture, scholarship and the university spirit. The environment of all three was the same, the influences which wrought upon them were similar; yet, in feeling, Lowell was more closely allied to the homespun Whittier,—for he was, above all else, a reformer and a preacher of righteousness.

He lacked Longfellow's fine sense of rhythm, but he wrote with a stronger hand; he did not have Longfellow's exquisite taste in the choice of words and figures, and he sometimes made mistakes, but he always had a message, while Longfellow often wrote to express a mood; both were true poets, but Longfellow was the greater artist, Lowell the more original thinker. Longfellow's verse is like a peaceful river, winding between banks of sunny verdure; Lowell's is a mountain

stream, impetuous, now rolling headlong over itself, and again quiet, as it gathers momentum for another rush.

The personalities of the two poets as revealed in their works as well as in their lives were also widely different. Both were polished, but Longfellow was like the polished marble, pure, delicate, fine-grained, while Lowell was the granite of his native New England hills, coarser in texture and made up of heterogeneous elements,—less beautiful, perhaps, and less perfect, but more truly representative of our American thought and life.

WALTER TAYLOR FIELD.

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

PRELUDE TO PART FIRST

VER his keys the musing organist,
Beginning doubtfully and far away,
First lets his fingers wander as they list,
And builds a bridge from Dreamland for his lay:
Then, as the touch of his loved intrument
Gives hope and fervor, nearer draws his theme,
First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent
Along the wavering vista of his dream.

Not only around our infancy
Doth heaven with all its splendors lie;
Daily, with souls that cringe and plot,
We Sinais climb and know it not.

Over our manhood bend the skies;
Against our fallen and traitor lives
The great winds utter prophecies;
With our faint hearts the mountain strives;
Its arms outstretched, the druid wood
Waits with its benedicite;
And to our age's drowsy blood
Still shouts the inspiring sea.

Earth gets its price for what Earth gives us;
The beggar is taxed for a corner to die in,
The priest hath his fee who comes and shrives us,
We bargain for the graves we lie in;
At the Devil's booth are all things sold,
Each ounce of dross costs its ounce of gold;
For a cap and bells our lives we pay,
Bubbles we buy with a whole soul's tasking:
'Tis heaven alone that is given away,
'Tis only God may be had for the asking;

No price is set on the lavish summer;
June may be had by the poorest comer.

And what is so rare as a day in June?
  Then, if ever, come perfect days;
Then Heaven tries earth if it be in tune,
  And over it softly her warm ear lays:
Whether we look, or whether we listen,
We hear life murmur, or see it glisten;
Every clod feels a stir of might,
  An instinct within it that reaches and towers,
And, groping blindly above it for light,
  Climbs to a soul in grass and flowers;
The flush of light may well be seen
  Thrilling back over hills and valleys;
The cowslip startles in meadows green,
  The buttercup catches the sun in its chalice,
And there's never a leaf nor a blade too mean
  To be some happy creature's palace;
The little bird sits at his door in the sun,

Atilt like a blossom among the leaves,
And lets his illumined being o'errun
With the deluge of summer it receives;
His mate feels the eggs beneath her wings,
And the heart in her dumb breast flutters and sings;
He sings to the wide world, and she to her nest, –
In the nice ear of Nature which song is the best?

Now is the high-tide of the year,
And whatever of life hath ebbed away
Comes flooding back with a ripply cheer
Into every bare inlet and creek and bay;
Now the heart is so full that a drop overfills it,
We are happy now because God wills it;
No matter how barren the past may have been,
'Tis enough for us now that the leaves are green;
We sit in the warm shade and feel right well
How the sap creeps up and the blossoms swell;
We may shut our eyes, but we cannot help
knowing

That skies are clear and grass is growing;
The breeze comes whispering in our ear
That dandelions are blossoming near,
  That maize has sprouted, that streams are flowing,
That the river is bluer than the sky,
That the robin is plastering his house hard by;
And if the breeze kept the good news back,
For other couriers we should not lack;
  We could guess it all by yon heifer's lowing,—
And hark! how clear bold chanticleer,
Warmed with the new wine of the year,
  Tells all in his lusty crowing!

Joy comes, grief goes, we know not how;
Everything is happy now,
  Everything is upward striving;
'Tis as easy now for the heart to be true
As for grass to be green or skies to be blue,—
  'Tis the natural way of living:

Who knows whither the clouds have fled?
In the unscarred heaven they leave no wake;
And the eyes forget the tears they have shed,
The heart forgets its sorrow and ache;
The soul partakes the season's youth,
And the sulphurous rifts of passion and woe
Lie deep 'neath a silence pure and smooth,
Like burnt-out craters healed with snow.
What wonder if Sir Launfal now
Remembered the keeping of his vow?

PART FIRST

I

MY golden spurs now bring to me,
And bring to me my richest mail,
For to-morrow I go over land and sea
In search of the Holy Grail;
Shall never a bed for me be spread,
Nor shall a pillow be under my head,
Till I begin my vow to keep;
Here on the rushes will I sleep,
And perchance there may come a vision true
Ere day create the world anew."
Slowly Sir Launfal's eyes grew dim,
Slumber fell like a cloud on him,
And into his soul the vision flew.

II

The crows flapped over by twos and threes,
In the pool drowsed the cattle up to their knees,

The little birds sang as if it were
The one day of summer in all the year,
And the very leaves seemed to sing on the trees:
The castle alone in the landscape lay
Like an outpost of winter, dull and gray;
'Twas the proudest hall in the North Countree,
And never its gates might opened be,
Save to lord or lady of high degree;
Summer besieged it on every side,
But the churlish stone her assaults defied;
She could not scale the chilly wall,
Though around it for leagues her pavilions tall
Stretched left and right,
Over the hills and out of sight;
Green and broad was every tent,
And out of each a murmur went
Till the breeze fell off at night.

III

The drawbridge dropped with a surly clang,
And through the dark arch a charger sprang,

Bearing Sir Launfal, the maiden knight,
In his gilded mail, that flamed so bright
It seemed the dark castle had gathered all
Those shafts the fierce sun had shot over its wall
  In his siege of three hundred summers long,
And, binding them all in one blazing sheaf,
  Had cast them forth: so, young and strong,
And lightsome as a locust-leaf,
Sir Launfal flashed forth in his unscarred mail,
To seek in all climes for the Holy Grail.

IV

It was morning on hill and stream and tree,
  And morning in the young knight's heart;
Only the castle moodily
Rebuffed the gifts of the sunshine free,
  And gloomed by itself apart;
The season brimmed all other things up
Full as the rain fills the pitcher-plant's cup.

V

As Sir Launfal made morn through the darksome gate,
He was 'ware of a leper, crouched by the same,
Who begged with his hand and moaned as he sate;
And a loathing over Sir Launfal came;
The sunshine went out of his soul with a thrill,
The flesh 'neath his armor 'gan shrink and crawl,
And midway its leap his heart stood still
Like a frozen waterfall;
For this man, so foul and bent of stature,
Rasped harshly against his dainty nature,
And seemed the one blot on the summer morn,—
So he tossed him a piece of gold in scorn.

VI

The leper raised not the gold from the dust:
"Better to me the poor man's crust,

Better the blessing of the poor,
Though I turn me empty from his door;
That is no true alms which the hand can hold;
He gives nothing but worthless gold
  Who gives from a sense of duty;
But he who gives a slender mite,
And gives to that which is out of sight,
  That thread of the all-sustaining Beauty
Which runs through all and doth all unite,—
The hand cannot clasp the whole of his alms,
The heart outstretches its eager palms,
For a god goes with it and makes it store
To the soul that was starving in darkness before."

PRELUDE TO PART SECOND

DOWN swept the chill wind from the mountain peak;
From the snow five thousand summers old;
On open wold and hill-top bleak
It had gathered all the cold,
And whirled it like sleet on the wanderer's cheek;
It carried a shiver everywhere
From the unleafed boughs and pastures bare;
The little brook heard it and built a roof
'Neath which he could house him, winter-proof;
All night by the white stars' frosty gleams
He groined his arches and matched his beams;
Slender and clear were his crystal spars
As the lashes of light that trim the stars:

He sculptured every summer delight
In his halls and chambers out of sight;
Sometimes his tinkling waters slipt
Down through a frost-leaved forest-crypt,
Long sparkling aisles of steel-stemmed trees
Bending to counterfeit a breeze;
Sometimes the roof no fretwork knew
But silvery mosses that downward grew;
Sometimes it was carved in sharp relief
With quaint arabesques of ice-fern leaf;
Sometimes it was simply smooth and clear
For the gladness of heaven to shine through, and here
He had caught the nodding bullrush-tops
And hung them thickly with diamond drops,
That crystalled the beams of moon and sun,
And made a star of every one:
No mortal builder's most rare device
Could match this winter-palace of ice;
'Twas as if every image that mirrored lay

In his depths serene through the summer day,
Each fleeting shadow of earth and sky,
  Lest the happy model should be lost,
Had been mimicked in fairy masonry
  By the elfin builders of the frost.

Within the hall are song and laughter,
  The cheeks of Christmas glow red and jolly,
And sprouting is every corbel and rafter
  With lightsome green of ivy and holly;
Through the deep gulf of the chimney wide
Wallows the Yule-log's roaring tide;
The broad flame-pennons droop and flap
  And belly and tug as a flag in the wind;
Like a locust shrills the imprisoned sap,
  Hunted to death in its galleries blind;
And swift little troops of silent sparks,
  Now pausing, now scattering away as in fear,
Go threading the soot-forest's tangled darks
  Like herds of startled deer.

But the wind without was eager and sharp,
Of Sir Launfal's gray hair it makes a harp,
And rattles and wrings
The icy strings,
Singing in dreary monotone,
A Christmas carol of its own,
Whose burden still, as he might guess,
Was—"Shelterless, shelterless, shelterless!"
The voice of the seneschal flared like a torch
As he shouted the wanderer away from the porch,
And he sat in the gateway and saw all night
The great hall-fire, so cheery and bold,
Through the window-slits of the castle old,
Build out its piers of ruddy light
Against the drift of the cold.

PART SECOND

I

THERE was never a leaf on bush or tree,
The bare boughs rattled shudderingly;
The river was dumb and could not speak,
For the frost's swift shuttles its shroud had spun;
A single crow on the tree-top bleak
From his shining feathers shed off the cold sun;
Again it was morning, but shrunk and cold,
As if her veins were sapless and old,
And she rose up decrepitly
For a last dim look at earth and sea.

II

Sir Launfal turned from his own hard gate,
For another heir in his earldom sate;

An old, bent man, worn out and frail,
He came back from seeking the Holy Grail;
Little he recked of his earldom's loss,
No more on his surcoat was blazoned the cross,
But deep in his soul the sign he wore,
The badge of the suffering and the poor.

III

Sir Launfal's raiment thin and spare
Was idle mail 'gainst the barbed air,
For it was just at the Christmas time;
So he mused, as he sat, of a sunnier clime,
And sought for a shelter from cold and snow
In the light and warmth of long ago;
He sees the snake-like caravan crawl
O'er the edge of the desert, black and small,
Then nearer and nearer, till, one by one,
He can count the camels in the sun,
As over the red-hot sands they pass
To where, in its slender necklace of grass,

The little spring laughed and leapt in the shade,
And with its own self like an infant played,
And waved its signal of palms.

IV

"For Christ's sweet sake, I beg an alms;"—
The happy camels may reach the spring
But Sir Launfal sees naught save the grewsome thing,
The leper, lank as the rain-blanched bone,
That cowers beside him, a thing as lone
And white as the ice-isles of Northern seas
In the desolate horror of his disease.

V

And Sir Launfal said,—"I behold in thee
An image of Him who died on the tree;
Thou also hast had thy crown of thorns,—
Thou also hast had the world's buffets and scorns,—

And to thy life were not denied
The wounds in the hands and feet and side;
Mild Mary's Son, acknowledge me;
Behold, through him, I give to thee!"

VI

Then the soul of the leper stood up in his eyes
And looked at Sir Launfal, and straightway he
Remembered in what a haughtier guise
He had flung an alms to leprosie,
When he caged his young life up in gilded mail
And set forth in search of the Holy Grail.
The heart within him was ashes and dust;
He parted in twain his single crust,
He broke the ice on the streamlet's brink,
And gave the leper to eat and drink;
'Twas a mouldy crust of coarse brown bread,
'Twas water out of a wooden bowl,—
Yet with fine wheaten bread was the leper fed,
And 'twas red wine he drank with his thirsty soul.

VII

As Sir Launfal mused with a downcast face,
A light shone round about the place;
The leper no longer crouched at his side,
But stood before him glorified,
Shining and tall and fair and straight
As the pillar that stood by the Beautiful Gate,
Himself the Gate whereby men can
Enter the temple of God in Man.

VIII

His words were shed softer than leaves from the pine,
And they fell on Sir Launfal as snows on the brine,
That mingle their softness and quiet in one
With the shaggy unrest they float down upon;
And the voice that was calmer than silence said,
"Lo, it is I, be not afraid!
In many climes, without avail,
Thou hast spent thy life for the Holy Grail;

Behold, it is here,—this cup which thou
Didst fill at the streamlet for me but now;
This crust is my body broken for thee,
This water His blood that died on the tree;
The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,
In whatso we share with another's need;
Not what we give, but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three,—
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and me."

IX

Sir Launfal awoke as from a swound:—
"The Grail in my castle here is found!
Hang my idle armor up on the wall,
Let it be the spider's banquet-hall;
He must be fenced with stronger mail
Who would seek and find the Holy Grail."

X

The castle gate stands open now,
And the wanderer is welcome to the hall
As the hangbird is to the elm-tree bough;
No longer scowl the turrets tall,
The Summer's long siege at last is o'er;
When the first poor outcast went in at the door,
She entered with him in disguise,
And mastered the fortress by surprise;
There is no spot she loves so well on ground,
She lingers and smiles there the whole year round;
The meanest serf on Sir Launfal's land
Has hall and bower at his command;
And there's no poor man in the North Countree
But is lord of the earldom as much as he.

DEC 23 1907

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
0 015 762 612 7